

Dear Esteemed Members of the Connecticut Education Committee, ,

My name is Maya Sheppard. I am a proud resident of New London. I am a parent, a former public school system employee and Executive Director of Hearing Youth Voices member organization of the Community First Coalition and the CT BBSU. Hearing Youth Voices supports bill SB1095. Every student and every child deserves to feel safe and to have access to an equitable and dignified educational experience based on their needs- and every child's needs are not the same.! I wanna start by saying what this bill IS NOT. It is not an attack on teachers who are tired and burnt out leaving the field at alarming rates with some districts reporting over 200 vacancies. It IS NOT meant to create more work load on the shoulders of school counselors and wellness staff who because of CT'S exacerbated teacher shortage are filling in in the classroom and are unable to do the job they were hired to do while there is an alarming 349:1 student to teacher ratio. It IS meant to uproot and transform the public schools system's dependence on law enforcement in place of the mental health and wellness of all students but especially black and brown students who are the most impacted by school based arrest, expulsion and suspension. And it IS meant to begin to push the needle forward on the expansion of funding and infrastructure for more care staff and even a deeper connection between school & community--- where a separation shouldn't exist to begin with. What young people have said that they need - CARE. Over and over again today i've heard --- I just needed someone to ask me what was going on, I needed someone to care. What I hear before us all today is an opportunity for you all, our legislative leaders, to prioritize social and emotional wellness and to push for equity across our state.

To clarify - we are putting forward that districts should have the right to CHOOSE. The right to choose a restorative approach that collaborates with mental health professionals who already have the training. By now you've heard countless stories of the trauma. That is why SB 1095 advocates for non security responses to non violent disruptions. And I would ask us to even examine what we consider to be violent when we're talking about young black and brown students. Unregulated contracts or MOUs further entrench the disproportion of school based arrest at the intersection of race and class. In 2020 in New London we began to organize to end the MOU between the police department and the NLPS - imagine our surprise when we learned that there wasn't a signed MOU for the previous 3 years yet police had been called to arrest students and a SRO salary of 118 thousand dollars was still in the district budget. That's double any teacher's salary in New London. This is an example of the importance of clarifying the roles and resources needed to support students , no suspend, not push out. Please advance sb 1095 and open the door for change to begin-

Thank you for your time,

Maya Sheppard